

How real is the real world?

Festival Report by Heike Kuehn

In Li Song's famous painting *The Skeleton's Illusory Performance* perception of the world changes. Jeeshie Hong writes in *The Art Bulletin* (March 2011) that it shows two motifs in Chinese painting, which have never been shown together before: worldly pleasures and death.

The pivotal point of this unlikely liaison is, according to J. Hong, seeing in itself. Why seeing equals perception is revealed to the beholder when he/she follows the visual axes of the figures. On the right hand side of the fan-shaped silk piece, one beholds two children: a girl and her little brother are focused body and soul on a string-puppet, which appears to be dancing right in front of them. It is a little skeleton, lifting its tiny hands as if it wanted to touch the approaching infant boy.

What the children cannot see, only the beholder and the mother of the two, who is poised on the left hand side of the painting: the puppeteer is death itself, who, sitting on the floor, gives the performance a time – and placeless world-spanning dimension. Death, giving a performance of creation and destruction, smiles. The mother's eyes are turned towards themselves, knowing what the little ones have to face. Still, there is nothing ominous about that scene. Death in the shape of the large skeleton plays with its own existence. *The Skeleton's Illusory Performance* presents man and his/her death, as well as an artistic self-enchancement of human destiny. Death is a sorcerer who, in mid-life, exhilarates fear of dying.

When did this sense of exhilaration get lost? Li Song's ink paintings and drawings are from the 13th century. Goethe's *Faust* takes place in the 16th century. Goethe's *Faust* also begins with a famous Prologue (in Heaven), but here you have two puppeteers making their doll dance. God and Mephistopheles engage in a bet to see in which direction Faust's soul can be moved. This Prologue is already far more uncanny than the meeting of children and death in Li Song's painting. What on earth is troubling the German mind so much that it designs a scenario in which God bets on human souls?

The Russian filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov explains this troubled mind in his award winning version of *Faust* as a nineteenth century phenomenon. Sokurov transfers Goethe's masterpiece from the 16th century to a study room, which he found when he paid a visit to Goethe's house in Weimar during his research work. Although Goethe had already been minister, said Sokurov in an interview with the German daily *taz*, his house was full of nooks and recesses, low, and poorly furnished.

Twisted thought. The effort to view things around several corners because to German metaphysics the idea of a straight connection between man and God is inconceivable is a strong motif in Sokurov's film, as is 19th century painting. Faust's study looks like Spitzweg's *Poor Poet* has been transferred to a German *Oblomov*, who would love to stay in bed, if it wasn't for his pangs of hunger.

Hunger is a key expression for the film which is as little an adaptation of Goethe's *Faust*, as Faust's hunger is a simple fact. "I am hungry", sounds from the mouth of German actor Johannes Zeiler, who plays the part of Faust, like a death threat. This particular Faust does not live of air and austerity neither of the chance of taking

poison which would do away with his failure of being doctor and philosopher, lawyer and major scholar.

No. This Faust has a cannibalistic aura when he rummages around the inside of a dead body. Much flesh and intestines are being turned inside out. The food the blood-stained doctor is looking for is not among the intestines. Again the soul could not be found. The feeling of hunger persists. One is inclined to believe to see an ancestor of a tribe of cannibals willing to find the powercenter of a vanquished enemy which has to be taken in. But the dead person is just a battlefield on which a fantastic Johannes Zeiler as a spiritually and materially deprived Faust meets his true enemy: Death.



Death has lost all its dignity. There is nothing left of the playful togetherness in Li Song's painting. Faust's father works as doctor and chiropractor, his rack could be from a dungeon, his posture is that of a man who thinks violence is a cure. If something hurts it must be effective. Whether his patients survive is not certain. For his erudite son, who nourishes Hamlet's 'pale cast of thought', the doctor has nothing but contempt. One tears the patients away from death or from life. As long as one is active, it's alright. Faust's inability to face the living leads him to the pawnbroker, who represents the devil. Mephisto calls himself Mauritius and in a rooted burrow he receives what his customers think precious. No doubt, they get it back moth-eaten. The devil is the very embodiment of decomposing and that's what he looks like. Foul gases ooze from his pear-shaped body rather recklessly, his hair is thinning and his back itches. But instead of stumpy wings, he apparently thinks he has, a pigtail shows at his bottom. Sexless, complaining and causing unrest, he follows the doctor around and finally talks him out of his soul. Faust is supposed to sign with blood like in Goethe's version. But his soul is far less of interest than the devil's spelling mistakes. In plain German (the whole film, made with German-Russian actors and actresses is in German): if the language is immaculate, killing somebody cannot be wrong.



This twisted view of life and Goethe's magnificent soul are matched by Bruno Delbonnel's camerawork. Famous for his depth, with which he filmed *The Wonderful Life of Amelie*, Debonnel managed to accomplish the exact opposite. The cinematic three-dimensional aspect is drained and sober, the colours are shades of grey, the bodies as flat as the thoughts which rule them. Even the body of the buildings is lacking depth, the houses confine and limit, the streets are always too narrow for the bustle of the bodies. No food, no space for unfolding. That is why the pawnbroker's/devil's underground passages which lead to open spaces and to Gretchen are so remarkable. Space and time cease to exist in this particular magic that only a sorcerer like Sokurov can provide.



Gretchen is all sulking with tender skin and robust conscience. Her downfall must be taken quite literally. In the most beautiful scene of this inspired film, she is standing on

a cliff ready to escape Faust's desire into a wet death. Lead by Mephisto, Faust reaches her in time to tumble into the lake in slow motion, in a vortex of desire, which anticipates the end of their love story. What Faust desires even more than Gretchen's love is conquering death.

It is thus not surprising that Faust stones the devil himself in the end. Sokurov summarizes *Faust II* in an icy, rocky landscape, which signifies Faust's ascent to dictatorship. He has understood the very principles of nature, shouts Faust with a majestically rising geyser as backdrop. Now the hole should get out of his way. *Faust* concludes, after films about Hitler, Lenin and the Japanese Emperor Hirohito, a tetralogy of abuse of power. "Unhappy people are dangerous", quotes this Faust his Goethe. Unhappiness here is the hubris of practicability of progressive thinking.

From Sokurov's Faust and the nature despising hubris of his anti-hero, it is only a short move to Sono Sion's superb film *Himizu*. Placed in a competitive realm as well, *Himizu* is a challenge to the eye and the ear. Not only is the protagonists' tone, which seems to come from one of Monoru Furuya's Manga strips, very provoking, the film's visual effects are also challenging. Wavering between satire and bitterness like all cinematic excesses supplied by Sono Sion so far, *Himizu* risks taking stock of Japan after the nuclear nightmare of Fukushima. Initially conceived as a vague apocalypse, the director has given the comic strip a much more definite setting after the nuclear meltdown on March 11, 2011. Sono Sion says he has entertained suicidal thoughts for a long time but working on the events of Fukushima has proven salutary.

According to Sono Sion, the days of normalcy are numbered. His film is a scream rather than a lament. Here is the portrait of a land whose grown-ups drive their children to suicide just to cash in on the life insurances. Ma and Pa take the devil's place, addicted to realising the dreams of an omnipresent youth mania. The children's/youth's initial response is resignation.



Like *Himizu*, the bashful hero whose name means "mole", the children bury themselves in the job of caring for their broken families psychologically and

financially. The nuclear catastrophe, the contamination of water and soil, the refugees in their tents, the greed of the Yakuza is only the background sound of an omnipresent indifference. Himizu murders his father because he cannot bear the humiliation anymore. Tormented by self-contempt, he decides to dedicate his life to vengeance. But destroying the evil is no solution in this film.

Not even in the shock and hatred twisted imitation of the gallant Samurai can Himizu gain an independent stance. While roaming the streets of Tokyo with a butcher's knife to slay the guilty he meets a fellow sufferer on a killing spree. The noble violence does not provide more dignity than pure madness. The mole finally surrenders to the police and a long prison term. With his freedom taken away, he finally learns something about himself.



Love, Eros and Death, this triad dominates art. From all civilisations do people, or at least artists, report crumbling physical and mental boundaries when one surrenders to the unifying power of love. The ego and his/her counter-ego exchange for a blissful moment more than just body juices. Something begins to flow and open up to the cosmos, expanding it to the bodies of the lovers, at least ideally. Already Goethe but also Sokurov saw: love is a crime that prompts the death of Gretchen's mother, the death of her illegitimate child and finally her own death. In *Himizu*, bourgeois love is a pact with the devil, aimed at conceiving children who are eventually sacrificed by their own parents.

Still, right in the middle of a festival, that destroyed illusions to tell the truth, one could find a film called **O Le Tulafale** (*The Orator*). It is a miracle, inasmuch it combines social criticism and the power of believing. In Tusi's film debut, in fact the first film ever that was made on Samoa by a native, suffering does not dominate love. It is a dwarf called Sali, despised by the villagers, who succeeds in breaking the power of the taboo The Samoan community portrayed by Tusi has long forgotten that a taboo can be something sensible when it balances nature and human beings, when it treats humans and gods on an equal footing. What is left is the word and its transformation to a concept of exclusion. Unable to communicate with forebears and gods, rivalling

clans use the taboo to take revenge against outsiders, increase their estates or cover up incidents of rape. Only the old Orator, who does not speak himself but disseminates the prophecies of the Samoan gods and in whose connection references to Jesus Christ are being put forth, tries to stop the greedy. Because also here the Faustian hunger has arrived. Faust is omnipresent, no matter what his skin colour, language or distance to God.

In the village, which has a church but no soul, lives the single mother Vaaiga with her teenage daughter and her husband Sali. Sali is not tall enough to reach up to Vaaiga's hips but he has the greatness to show he is Vaaiga's husband. Crippled or not, he is a man and can save a fallen like Vaaiga through marriage.



Vaaiga is the Samoan Gretchen, who refused to kill her child. Instead she left her wealthy and unscrupulous family to lead a modest life under the protection of her marital state, although that marriage only exists on paper. The film suggests that Vaaiga was sexually abused by members of her family when she was a young girl. The abuse is never made explicit. The wrong view of the taboo, that judges instead setting things right, is a burden to Vaaiga, until she succumbs to the pressure of being guilty and dies.

In the cinema, death is moved away from us. People die in action films but it is only actors and actresses that disappear from the story. A festival like this changes our perception of death, and thus our perception of life.

Even after her death, the shameless, who babble about honour and power, besmirch Vaaiga's body. They drag the corpse to the very house that Vaaiga escaped from and almost kill the dwarf.

According to the director, there is a dwarf in each of us regarding our culture our work or our lack of confidence. Inaugurated by the old Orator to be his successor, Sali receives the staff of the speaker. It is twice as long as Sali is tall. His attempts to handle the staff end by ramming it into the ground deep enough to on level with the

power he received. Here the ridiculous and the sublime do not exclude each other. In the end, Vaaiga's body is returned home and another child is born out of wedlock to Vaaiga's daughter. The child's father is a local womaniser. But this time the taboo is cleared. The child has Sali as her grand little grandpa, who will protect it.

Translation: Michael Leetz

